

Helsinki University Change Review

Beyond the Changes:

The effects of, and lessons to be learnt from, the downsizing and restructuring process of 2015-2017

Summary and Recommendations

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To: The University of Helsinki

October 2017

Background

The University of Helsinki has been through a very challenging period since the announcement of significant cuts to its funding from the Finnish Government in 2015 and the parallel reduction in the resource from the University Pharmacy. Government guidance was that the response to the budget reduction should not have any major effect on the University's core activities of teaching and research so The University Board agreed that the best way for the University to deal with the cuts, which at that time were expected to continue year on year until 2020, was to downsize the administration, which entailed losing 323 posts. 48 Academics posts were also removed.

When change in the University's finances occurred the University Senior Management Team was already developing strategic plans to centralize and professionalize the administration, as well as moving to a new Bachelor's and Master's structure with a redesigned and more interdisciplinary curriculum, under the umbrella of the 'Big Wheel' project. In addition there has been a reorganization of Faculties and a move away from Departments. Making such significant changes within a similar time frame would in itself have been a huge challenge without the decision to downsize as well.

A situation was created unlike anything that the University of Helsinki had experienced before and there was a great deal of distress and anxiety, and not a little anger and frustration across the institution. It was requested in a paper by Professor Sarah Green (see Annex i), of the Anthropology Department, that a process be put in place to help the University to recover, and move on, from the major changes that occurred in 2015/16. The Board and the Senior Management Team accepted this idea and a Review Group was established, towards the end of 2016, (full details of members at Appendix 1) with myself as its chair. The Helsinki University Change Review Group (HUCRG) had two separate, but interconnected, tasks:

1. To give members of the University the opportunity to reflect on, and either speak or write about, their experiences concerning, the University's change process.
2. To draw on this testimony, and on other documentation, and information from interviews, in order to give feedback on the views about, and the lessons to be learnt, from the change process.

The HUCR Group was established with a chair and three members with extensive experience of leadership, strategy and change management in Higher Education. The HUCRG was entirely independent of any group or body within the University of Helsinki and it was agreed that the report of their findings would be written for and disseminated to the whole University community.

Methodology

Members of the HUCRG visited the University on five separate occasions between January and June 2017, The Group held four open meetings, one on each of the University's four campuses attended by around 100 people, and meetings with over 60 people with a wide range of roles and responsibilities across the University as well as 17 group discussions with around 80 academics and administrators (see Appendix 2). We received written submissions from over 400 individuals (see Appendix 3). On the basis of this information, along with documents relevant to the change processes and other background information, and in conjunction with our own expertise and understanding of current debates and issues in the Higher Education sector in Finland, and more widely, we have developed a view of the University of Helsinki's change process and its aftermath which is discussed in this report. In the report we draw out the dominant themes presented to us and present these through the use of, unattributed, direct quotations and indicating whether these encapsulate either a majority or a minority view

Feedback from Staff and Students

At the hearings and in the meetings we held there was a great deal of sadness and confusion expressed as well as some anger with many people conveying the view that they did not recognize the University. This can be summed up by a shift from describing Helsinki University as 'Our University' to referring to it as 'The University', with the latter often used to invoke the Senior Management.

Key recurring themes presented to the HUCRG have been that:

- The staff reductions were extremely harsh and not well handled
- Perhaps such deep cuts were not really necessary
- Communication about the changes was extremely poor
- Leadership was inadequate at all levels
- The changes have been too many and too fast
- The centralization of the administration has gone too far
- That the underlying rationale for the Big Wheel is poorly understood
- The move away from disciplines and Departments is in general a bad idea

These themes have tended to be wrapped within a wider set of concerns about democracy, trust and respect within the University.

There was some positive feedback but this made up only a small minority of the total and was often tempered with comments of there being teething troubles and short term chaos which would need to be got over before the more positive aspects could emerge. Some people could see that a more professional administration with a better career structure was a good thing, but most of them still felt that the implementation of the restructuring had been problematic due to the simultaneous downsizing of the administration. A number of people welcomed the move to a clearer and more standardized structure for academic degrees and some were

genuinely excited about being involved in curriculum innovation, but the latter respondents also expressed major concerns with regard to the new programmes in relation to: administrative support; financial resources; the consistent availability of teachers and the location of programmes in relation to the new Faculty structures.

Discussion

The Review Group understands that Government's cuts and related directives put the Board and the Senior Management team in a very difficult position, we also understand that given the pre-existing plans to restructure the Administration it made sense to do this at the same time as making the staff cuts. However, we think that there was overreaction in relation to the speed of the process. We appreciate that having protracted process would have made staff even more anxious about their job security and that it is always important to move as swiftly as possible to a functioning situation. However we are clear that good leadership and good communication go hand in hand and are crucial in such a situation and think that it would have been wiser to have taken a little more time to discuss and communicate more fully and with greater interaction. This would also have afforded the opportunity for further leadership and other training necessary to conduct the process in the best possible manner and may even have made it possible to bring in some experienced project management from outside of the University to better facilitate the process. We think that some external support would have been particularly helpful, given that Helsinki University had never been through such a major change process before and therefore direct experience was lacking at all levels, whereas there is a good deal of experience elsewhere in the sector worldwide.

In relation to the centralization of the administration, the combination of the feedback from across the University and our own experience of organization and change administration in a number of Universities, leads us to strongly advise the University to closely evaluate the new structure and to examine the effectiveness of key processes. It is our view that the matrix model has certain weaknesses in the context of a large and complex University and would urge Senior Management to strengthen direct administrative support within Faculties in order to ensure that academics can focus more on teaching and research. We are absolutely not arguing for a return to the local and multi-layered administrative structures of the past but for high functioning, professional administrative teams working with Deans in relation to, for example, Finance and HR functions as well as with Programme Directors, Graduate Schools and offering research services. We would also stress the need for some local administrative support for Deans in relation to practical, organizational matters. Such Faculty based administrators would also be members of central professional teams within Directorates and therefore would have access to career development and be able to share best practice.

With regard to the 'Big Wheel' we fully understand the need to align the degree and qualifications structure at HU both with the Bologna process and with a structure which is internationally widespread and recognized:

Bachelors/Masters/PhD, and the need to have more standardization of structures and processes across the University for reasons of equity and parity. It is clear that there were different ways of doing things in each Faculty, prior to the re-organization, and that this was inefficient, potentially unfair and didn't allow for the development of best practice or for the sharing of ideas and courses. In the context of a system in which there are relatively few full-time academics on long-term contracts who are available to teach and high student numbers, introducing teaching efficiencies is a necessary move, but we would urge the University to consider the extension of the tenure track programme in order to ensure sustainability in relation to teaching.

We encountered a lack of clarity about the purpose of the 'Big Wheel' and quite a lot of criticism of the development of, what was seen as the forced creation of, Interdisciplinary programmes, especially at Bachelor's level, particularly, but not exclusively from academics on the Central Campus. It can be argued that the loss of a strong disciplinary grounding is potentially problematic for students, especially if they want to continue with an academic or research related career and more so in relation to fields with a broader range of theory and methods, than might be the case in the STEM disciplines. We appreciate that there has been pressure from the Finnish Government to ensure that graduates have appropriate skills for employment and also that the development of interdisciplinary fields are seen as essential to solving a range of social and scientific problems. However, intrinsically interdisciplinary fields aside strong interdisciplinarity develops out of strong component areas. To develop genuinely interdisciplinary programmes at undergraduate level requires much more academic input than more traditional disciplinary degrees and are therefore, at their best, unlikely to produce teaching economies. There is also a risk that such programmes will actually be 'multidisciplinary' and fail to give students sufficient in-depth knowledge or skills across any of the areas covered.

There was also confusion in relation to what the combination of the strengthened position of Faculties and the development the new programmes meant, more fundamentally, for disciplines at Helsinki University. Some respondents seem to think that moving budgets to faculty level meant the end of Departments and therefore of Disciplines, whereas others were more concerned about the disappearance of a strong disciplinary degree structure. There are many Universities where Faculty Deans are budget holders, but disciplinary departments are still important; the combination of the two changes at HU does raise questions about the structure of academic relations below Faculty level. Some of the confusion arises from the apparent differences in the treatment of disciplines in each Faculty. A web search produces a Department of Physics, Department of Chemistry and a Department of Psychology, for example. Whereas a search for 'History' leads to a Department of 'Philosophy, History, Culture and Art studies, which in most University's would be described as a School. On the other hand a search for Sociology or Anthropology, for example leads to The Faculty of Social Sciences where clicking on 'Faculty' – as opposed to 'Studying' or 'Research' – leads to 'Units' and finally under the 'Unit' of Social Research there is a list of disciplines. The confusion

is therefore understandable and the situation really needs to be clarified, not least because experience suggests that Academics need an academic home and a focus for research and teaching especially in a very large University.

An international University with ambitions to move into the top 50 in the University Rankings, also needs a really excellent website and this is far from being the case at present. Of course every website is a work in progress, but it is important that the HU website works well for international applicants, those seeking information about research, other stakeholders and also for the staff and students in the University. It also needs to work equally well in English, Finnish and Swedish. This is a significant challenge, but it is important that it is met as far as is possible.

Reflections

It is hoped that, as was the intention set out in Professor Green's paper, the process of undertaking this Review has helped members of the University community to process what has happened, to feel that they have been listened to, taken seriously and therefore feel able to begin to focus more positively on the future. It is important to learn from the changes that have occurred in the University, but equally important not to focus on the pros and cons of what has happened to the detriment of the future of the University as a whole. Nevertheless in our view there are some important lessons to be learnt from the events of the past two years a major one being that in the context of Universities totally top-down decision-making is neither effective nor efficient.

The HUCRG set out to document the views of the staff and students at the University of Helsinki and to examine the main aspects of the recent change process. In relation to the view that any major change causes anxiety – and most especially in an organization unused to major rapid change – we have certainly found this to be the case.

It seems that opinions about the 'state of the University' continue to be mixed. Some people think that there is still a long way to go before a steady state is reached, and there is still a good deal of concern, especially about increased workloads across both the academic and administrative areas of the University. However, there does seem to be a sense, at least in some quarters that the fog is lifting and that things are getting better. In relation to short term effects there is still a great deal of confusion (sometimes bordering on chaos), as staff settle in to new roles and new systems and processes bed down. These problems should resolve in the short and medium term but, of greater concern is the fact that in relation to some aspects of the changes there is a view that some of the problems are more fundamental and will have long lasting repercussions if not revisited.

We hope that it will now be possible to acknowledge that it has been a very difficult time, for staff and students, and that communications need to improve and greater trust engendered, and a commitment given that any future changes would be handled more sensitively. We also hope that, in the areas where there is most

significant criticism, of the new academic and administrative structures and organization, dialogue will develop along with a will to revisit and re-evaluate some decisions. Finally we hope that the view will prevail, that all staff, senior management included, and students, are part of the same University, and all are valuable, and that it once again Helsinki University will be referred to as 'Our University'.

Recommendations

Vision and Strategy:

- That all members of the University have the opportunity to be involved in discussions about the best way forward for Helsinki, as an international University for the 21st century.

Communication:

- That urgent attention is given to the University's communications strategy including an evaluation of the communications functions across the University. This could include researching staff views about the forms of communication which work best for different kinds of information and establishing a multidisciplinary working group to explore how to develop the strategy
- That the University's website is urgently reviewed with regard to its fitness for purpose internally and externally and especially in relation to its functionality as a tool for international reputation enhancement and recruitment
- That due thought is given to how to develop the communications skills of staff in leadership roles across the University
- That there is absolute clarification of the processes legally necessary to implement and manage both voluntary and compulsory redundancies so that everyone can understand why there was a lack of open consultation and a need for confidentiality so that a line can be drawn under the process
- That there is transparent communication about the University's financial position and the overall effect of the downsizing
- Should there be the need for major change/restructuring in the future that there is greater transparency and engagement with staff and also that appropriate training and project and communications management are put in place.

Leadership and Development:

- It is important that senior management acknowledge that the last couple of years have been very difficult, that they have learnt from the process, and that confidence and trust needs to be re built
- That the University Board strives to become less distant and engages in a process whereby they come to understand better the effects of the change

process – this could be done in part through the use of an expert facilitator and in part via informal visits to different areas and projects within the University

- That the Rector and the Director of Administration engage more directly with staff and that members of the senior team engage in more regular smaller scale meetings with staff in different areas of the University where genuine conversations can occur
- That consideration is given to ways of building trust both between the academics and the new services departments and also between the staff and the senior management team – through shared projects. These could be led by new Vice Rectors, Directors and Deans who were not directly involved with the previous changes

Structural and Organizational:

- That there is a process evaluation of the centralization of administrative in order to understand what is and is not working
- That serious consideration is given to establishing devolved administrative support teams located in Faculties along with specifically dedicated support for Deans
- That the Faculty Structure be reviewed with a view to strengthening and raising the visibility of the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences
- That the decision to move away from 'Departments' be clarified and reconsidered. In doing this an comparative analysis is needed of the organization of academic areas in comparable and highly ranked universities
- That work should be undertaken to develop a more nuanced understanding of the different research needs across the whole range of disciplines and fields and therefore of the need for appropriate support on each campus. It is still an open question as to whether establishing research institutes in the Humanities and Social Sciences, along the lines of those in the other Faculties, would be a positive development, but due consideration should also be given to the value to the University's international reputation of having an Institute of Advanced Studies

Academic:

- That there is an in-depth, preferably external, evaluation of the roll-out of the Big-Wheel in order to ascertain how well it is working and whether any changes are necessary

- That the question of 'Interdisciplinarity', where it is appropriate and how best to achieve it, in relation to research and teaching, is explored further by a multi-disciplinary 'Working- Group'
- That consideration is given to further expansion of the tenure track scheme with the aim being to move as far as is financially possible from ad hoc teaching arrangements to appropriate and stable staffing levels for each programme
- That each Programme should have a clear budget line and that there should be consideration of how best to provide administrative support to all Programme Directors and to greater clarity in relation to the organizational 'home' for all programmes